

Writing for New Forms

WHY TAKE THIS COURSE?

You can write a cogent essay, but can you write it in 140 characters or less?

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN:

How to adapt your message to multiple formats and audiences—human and machine.



riting used to mean arranging words in a particular order to be printed with ink on the cellulosic entrails of a tree. You wrote for people, and you hoped that the marks you made would leave a permanent impression upon the world. Today, writing can refer to anything from posting a one-line status update on Facebook to dashing off a 10,000-word blog entry. Your readers include not just humans but algorithms, and your goal is not immortality but a momentary piercing of the ever-shifting zeitgeist.

There are more writing opportunities than ever, but they require skills that Strunk and White never dreamed of. This course will teach you how to Photoshop images to create a narrative, edit a 20-second YouTube video, compress your thoughts into 140 characters (or clarify them into a PowerPoint presentation that won't put your audience to sleep), write a wiki entry that encourages other people to edit and adapt it, and ensure your work goes viral, turning readers into vectors for your ideas.

Technical skills, however, are not enough. Writing successfully requires knowing how to attract niche audiences with depth and detail. To demonstrate this, we'll contrast *The New York Times Magazine's* profile of Yankee pitcher Mariano Rivera with the accompanying Web video of the nearly 1,300 pitches Rivera threw during the 2009 baseball season.

The role of the writer is also changing. In the age of objectivity, writers kept their personalities out of their work. But now, the author's identity is paramount; readers have to believe you offer a unique—and trustworthy—perspective. Tone and personality are once again central to writing, not something to be smoothed and scrubbed. We'll study the work of *The Atlantic's* Andrew Sullivan, who built a blog empire with an informal voice that makes readers feel as if they are accessing his unvarnished thoughts; *New York Times* blogger Andrew Revkin, who encourages reader loyalty by posting long passages from the emails that they send him; and director Kevin Smith, who recounts sex with his wife in lascivious detail to keep his 1.7 million Twitter followers hitting Refresh.

Writing today also means mastering metatext, the cues and context that determine how, where, and if your words get read. We'll learn that winning links depends on appealing to the unique tastes of different social networks. Each link will help you attract your most influential audience—the algorithms that determine where your story ends up in Google's search results. As we optimize our writing for this cyborg readership, we'll also learn the new tenets of writing well: Be conspicuous, be entertaining, and leave space for others to talk.

BY ALEXIS MADRIGAL

READING LIST

**@ebertchicago
Twitter feed**
Provides insight into the constant churn of renowned film reviewer Roger Ebert's mind and erases the distance between critic and audience.

**"Slow Loris Loves Getting Ticked!"
YouTube video**
This shaky one-minute piece takes an exotic subject—an endangered and adorable Asian primate—and makes it feel as familiar as your aunt's cat videos.

**"Charlie Rose by Samuel Beckett"
YouTube video**
Cleverly edited clip makes it look like the PBS host is interviewing himself, then veers into awkward pauses, absurd interjections, and a mounting sense of despair. This mashup starts out amusing but turns haunting; it proves you don't need a pen to describe the void.

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GUEST LECTURE

JEFFREY HEER

wired.com/magazine/wiredu



STANFORD COMPUTER SCIENTIST AND COCREATOR OF THE PREFUSE AND PROTOVIS VISUALIZATION TOOLS SHARES TIPS FOR BUILDING BETTER INFOGRAPHICS:

START WITH A QUESTION, LET IT EVOLVE

Don't predetermine what you're looking for—the most intriguing correlations might get lost.

DO NOT WRITE IN THIS AREA

LET FORM FOLLOW FUNCTION

Use the variables—position, size, shape, color—that best communicate the underlying data. Bar charts and scatter plots make it easier to compare numeric values. Using different colors can effectively indicate categories but work less well for representing numbers.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Resist the urge to overwhelm with information. Instead, show just the variables that illustrate your point. If you want to make multiple points, a series of simple graphics will be clearer than a single overloaded visual.